DCCUMENT RESUME

ED 049 734 JC 710 112

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TITLE	Shaping an English Curriculum to Fit the Junior College Student.
INSTITUTION	American Association of Junior Colleges, Washington, D.C.; Califcrnia Univ., Los Angeles. ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Coll. Information.
PUE DATE	Jun 71
NOTE	4p.
JOURNAL CIT	Junicr College Research Review; v5 n10 June 1971
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*English Curriculum, *Individualized Instruction, *Junicr Colleges, *Remedial Instruction, Research Reviews (Publications), *Teaching Methods

AESTRACT

No great changes can cccur in English curricula until there are significant changes in form. This review stresses the shaping of curricula tc the student rather than the student to the curricula. Remedial English and individualized instruction are specifically discussed. The most sericus consequence of misunderstanding in remedial English is the attempted remediation cf the symptcm (pccr performance) rather than the disease (inadequate mctivation). A solution is the abolishment of homogeneous remedial classes, with their prcblem cf reinfcrcing failure, and the establishment of heterogeneous classes whose cooperative learning situation enables remedial and better qualified students to share equally in the ccsts and prcfits of learning. There is a need for further reorganization of the physical environment to guarantee individualized instructicn to each student. Based on a conviction that students learn best when exposed to a wide range of learning situations, rather than to a large-group, single-teacher approach, a suggestion is offered to recruit teaching assistants and reorganize a schedule for teaching and learning. (CA)

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Volume 5, Number 10

ERIC

JUNIOR COLLEGE RESEARCH REVIEW

June 1971

Published by the American Association of Junior Colleges

ED049734

SHAPING AN ENGLISH CURRICULUM TO FIT THE JUNIOR COLLEGE STUDENT

Each Monday evening from mid-January through early May of 1971, not less than three or more than six English teachers from the University of Michigan made a two-hour round trip between Ann Arbor and Detroit to offer a three-hour seminar called "Teaching English in the Community College." At a personal cost of one hundred and five dollars apiece, plus a long Monday evening, approximately twenty teachers from five junior colleges, one four-year college, and several secondary schools attended the seminar for three graduate credits in English. At the time this report was begun, a third of the seminar was done. At the same time, perhaps that fraction of both its faculty and its students was equally done, though almost all continued to meet together on Monday evenings until merciful May brought reprieve.

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What went wrong? Nothing less than the basic assumptions of both parties: As university teachers we assumed we could offer a pilot course that would guide us in shaping the program for next autumn's new graduate degree in teaching English at the junior college, to be known as a Doctor of Arts in English. As teachers from neighboring community colleges, our seminarians assumed that participation in formative stages of the new degree program might bring profit to their person and profession alike.

Taken separately, the assumptions seem reasonable; taken together, they were disastrous. The six of us failed to understand that many – perhaps most – teachers attending the seminar wanted methods and materials *now* to use with their own students *now*. No more did they understand our need to build an extensive foundation of rhetorical, linguistic, and literary agreement before we advocated methods and materials for classroom use. We did not understand that a city seminar of teachers who will return next morning to their classrooms is poignantly different from a campus seminar of candidates-in-residence who will not return to their classrooms for at least a year. The misunderstandings on both sides were massive; now, perhaps, the profits of reexamination can be equally large. One area of benefit already apparent is the relationship of classroom rhetoric to teaching English in the community college.

First let me define this particular use of "rhetoric": Rather than limit the word to its present meaning of persuasion in language, I want to re-expand its deflated modern usage into the shape that it held in English for several hundred years after the middle of the sixteenth century. Then it referred to acts as well as words, and one might have spoken meaningfully of classroom rhetoric without being limited to verbal and vocal eloquence.

In this sense of the word, teachers who attend our Monday evening seminar are greatly concerned about two aspects of classroom rhetoric. I discovered their concern when I asked them to write at their leisure to the question of what they would do if they had full freedom to reshape the English curriculum in their schools. Teacher after teacher spoke of the matched problems of teaching *remedial English* in any circumstances and teaching *individuals* in circumstances where individual needs were submerged beneath the flooding demands of large classes. Perhaps most striking was their reiterated belief that their success was inversely proportional to the amount of remediation or individual attention their students required.

Though the common sense of failure in the face of remediative and individual needs is remarkable, it ought not be surprising. I will argue here that "remedial English" is improbable as it is now generally conceived, and that "individual instruction" is not only probable but even unavoidable in every successful English composition class in any community college. Furthermore, I am reasonably sure that English composition cannot successfully be taught by anyone, no matter how inspired, who makes considerable use of lecture-and-large-group-discussion methods. Reasonable surety comes nearer to certainty when those methods are applied to the traditional population of remedial English courses.

I believe that remedial English is often the most ill-conceived course in junior college curricula because it is based upon a misunderstanding as radical as the one that divided our Monday evening seminar. No more than we understood our students' needs in that seminar, do teachers of remedial classes in junior colleges understand the real

needs of their students. The most serious consequence of this misunderstanding is the attempted remediation of symptom rather than disease in students who suffer from the plague of insufficient literacy.

The symptom I refer to is poor performance, while the disease it most often manifests is inadequate motivation. Remedial English teachers have suffered so long from the myopia of perceiving effect as cause that they often perceive their primary function in terms of changing a student's performance rather than changing how he feels about that performance. Yet these are the same teachers who identify one of their most difficult problems as the joyless expectation of their students. Having always done badly in "English," no matter how English was defined, they are students who have no anticipation of success. Knowing themselves inadequate, their self-knowledge reinforced once again by the familiar surroundings of a remedial English class, they become experienced participants in a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure.

The first act in breaking this destructive cycle of ritual action and response is abolition of remedial English both as classroom and concept. Let neither student nor teacher find himself trapped in the relationship of terminal patient and desperate physician. Let such freedom arise from conviction that performance follows feeling as effect follows cause. Give students the lever of self-respect to raise their burden of inadequate literacy. Give it to them by abandoning the homogeneous grouping that surrounds failure with mirrors designed to inflict upon deficiency reflections of itself.

Why are we so slow to make use of all weapons in our war against partial literacy? Which of us has not said that students who can resist teacher and family pressure are the same ones who cannot resist peer pressure? Why do we isolate the worst students from the most effective agents for change by removing them from the presence of their more accomplished peers and by condemning them to the company of those too like themselves? So long as all English composition classes are not heterogeneous, the least will continue to diminish while the best will flourish at their expense.

How to profit from heterogeneity? Let each one teach one; make the more and less competent responsible for each other. Imitate the pair system of waterfront safety. The imitation will be apt, for remedial students are often in danger of drowning, of going down for the last time in the cold sea of homogeneous group instruction. Pair best and worst; each will learn from the other, for nothing instructs the instructor more efficiently than the act of instruction itself. If the effect of student responsibility widened to include another student is a broadened humanity, then all will be the richer for it.

Several teachers in our Monday evening seminar have told me that they suspect a gentle phrase like "broadened humanity" hides a harsh intent which worries them. "Do you believe," they have asked me, "that the bright ones should pay for the dumb ones? Isn't the real effect of heterogeneous classrooms to take us back to the bad old days when we had no time for the bright ones, and they had to look after themselves?" My answer is that "the bad old days" were based upon the abuse rather than the use of heterogeneous classrooms.

"Tracking," "ability grouping," and "heterogeneous classrooms" all have negative discrimination as their common practical basis. In theory, of course, that is not true. The intent of ability grouping, by whatever name, has always been to gather students of like ability in teachable groups. But a theory conceived to profit all students and teachers became a practice that injured many students while benefiting many teachers. For the truth is that very few teachers have ever had to teach a full schedule of incompetent students, except by choice, while incompetent students have no choice at all in a full schedule of association with students no more competent than themselves.

Thus, in fact, the practical effect of ability grouping has been a negative discrimination which condemns the worst to imitate themselves while it frees the best to profit from each other. And it also frees teachers to shape the largest possible number of students in the mold of the teachers' own education – to attain more easily the educator's fulfillment of making *them* like *us*. But the cost of that freedom is nothing less than the spirit and hope of "unpromising" students, who have only to gaze at the mirror images surrounding them to know themselves (even as they are known) as the educationally unfit of our time.

The historical abuse of heterogeneous grouping is founded upon the assumption that one teacher can provide in less than one hour a significant learning experience for thirty to forty students of widely varied ability and motivation. This assumption is tenable only when the teacher is a genius; otherwise, it is ludicrous, and every teacher of remedial English – as well as many teachers of all other subjects – knows it. The solution? Take the problem to the students. Resurrect the body of heterogeneous grouping and infuse it with the spirit of cooperative learning. Students together are far more likely to accomplish what teachers alone have never been able to manage.

Now, about that question: Should the smart ones pay for the dumb ones? For so long as we have had ability grouping, the weak performer has paid for the strong. If immorality is a condition of degrees, then it is more immoral to require the less able to pay the price. In a properly organized classroom based upon paired students of contrasting performance, both members of the pair should share equally in cost and profit. But if one must pay for the other, let us require payment of those who will survive the price.

Exchanging homogeneous for heterogeneous classrooms is a beginning point for true solution of problems which characterize remedial English in the community college. Next stage in the solution ought to be further reorganization of the physical environment to guarantee individualized instruction to each student. Though such a guarantee may sound utopian and extravagant, it is within easy reach of every junior college in the country. Far from being unrealistic, it seems to me the only practical course that English teachers can follow.

Any search for a guarantee of individualized instruction must begin by admitting that such instruction cannot regularly occur within the present pattern of classroom organization. No teacher can give enough individual attention when that teacher is solely responsible for five classes of thirty students. To rely upon the compelling force of this truism as a means to the end of reducing class size and course responsibility is to accept certain failure; reduced class size, diminished teaching load, and the millennium will come together. Until their arrival, we will have to

deal with too many students and too many classes. Within that hard reality, much can be done.

Begin with recruitment—recruit teaching assistants from among the most competent students. In community colleges, not only second-year but second-semester students should be employed. Give the teaching assistant responsibility for six hours a week of tutorials and paper reading with each composition class. Six hours of inexpensive help with each composition class each week for each English teacher could be the best investment in the welfare of both students and faculty that any community college ever made. With such help available, schedules for teaching and learning might look like this:

I *Teacher's two-week schedule:* six contact hours

Two one-hour class meetings on Mondays

Eight half-hour group-of-four tutorials on Wednesdays and Fridays.

II *Teaching assistant's two-week schedule:* six contact hours

Two one-hour class meetings on Mondays

Eight half-hour group-of-four tutorials on Wednesdays and Fridays

Six hours of paper reading.

III *Student's two-week schedule:* three contact hours

M class meeting

W half-hour tutorial one day

F no meeting on other.

Such a schedule is intended to meet many needs. Foremost, of course, is the desire of teacher and student to offer and receive individualized instruction. Each person who has taught and each person who has been instructed in an English composition class knows that such classes are useful generally in proportion to their relative infrequence. In this schedule, teacher and teaching assistant together meet once each week with the entire student group; all other meetings are in groups of four, where individual attention can hope to solve individual problems.

Groups of four are the basis for this two-week schedule because they represent two pairs within the heterogeneous classroom. In such a tutorial arrangement, the teacher can simultaneously instruct all four students while preparing the stronger member of each pair to assist the weaker. In that same arrangement, the teaching assistant can help all four students while receiving help with his task from the stronger members. Given a class size not larger than thirty-two, both teacher and teaching assistant are responsible for no more than the traditional three contact hours per week; yet, in any two-week period, each student profits from the multiple learning experiences of large group, small group, and truly individual instruction.

But what of the student's contact hours? Have we not reduced them by half if we institute such a schedule? We have indeed, and much for the better I think. American higher education has too long force-fed its students and called the process "learning." The actual name of the process is "teaching," which unfortunately can be a very different thing. This schedule is based upon the conviction that students learn best when exposed to a wide range of learning situations, one of which is exposure to self.

Under the title of "Shaping an English Curriculum to Fit the Junior College Student," a large title for a larger enterprise, I have written about problems of remediation and individualized instruction. Both the broad title and narrow range of this essay were deliberate. They reflect my belief that no substantial change can occur in present English curricula until they have undergone significant alterations in form. What those formal alterations must be I have tried to indicate by condemning homogeneous classrooms and historical patterns of large-group, single-teacher instruction. Though my arguments are various, my thesis remains unchanged: If we do not make every effort to shape the curriculum to fit the student, instead of trying to shape the student to fit the curriculum, we will soon discover that our well-shaped courses fit no one but ourselves.

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JUNIOR COLLEGE RESEARCH REVIEW

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JUN 3 1971

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